

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis B

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SEP 16 1988

What is hepatitis B?

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Hepatitis B (formerly called serum hepatitis) is a viral infection that causes swelling of the liver. While most people who get hepatitis B recover from the disease, a few become chronic carriers who can pass the virus on to others for a long time.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

People infected with the hepatitis B virus (HBV) often feel weak and vaguely ill, lose their appetites, run fevers, and develop headaches. Less common symptoms include muscle pain, darkened urine, jaundice (yellow skin and whites of eyes), nausea, abdominal discomfort, depression, and irritability. Symptoms can begin as soon as six weeks or as long as six months after infection with HBV.

How is hepatitis B spread?

People with acute hepatitis B infections and those who are chronic carriers have HBV in their blood, semen, saliva, and other body fluids. When these infected fluids enter the blood of susceptible (non-immune) people through mucous membranes or breaks in the skin, the virus can also enter. Hepatitis B is most easily spread to drug users who share needles, sexual partners of infected people, and health care workers who accidentally stick themselves with used needles. Pregnant women who have HBV in their blood can pass the virus to their babies during delivery. Sharing items such as toothbrushes, razors, and washcloths with infected people can also spread infection.

Who gets hepatitis B?

In the United States, the estimated lifetime risk of HBV infection can be as low as 5% or as high as 90%, depending on circumstances. The people at highest risk are:

- infants born to infected mothers,
- users of intravenous drugs,
- sexual partners of infected people,
- people with many sexual partners,
- health care workers, and
- anyone else who has frequent blood contact.

Clients and staff of institutions for the mentally retarded and housemates of chronically infected people are at higher risk of infection than the general population, but lower risk than those listed above.

Is hepatitis B dangerous?

Most people (about 90%) who get hepatitis B recover within 6 months of their first symptoms. Some others, however, become chronic hepatitis B carriers. These carriers can develop chronic liver disease, which can lead to cancer and cirrhosis (scarring and shrinking) of the liver. Carriers can also put their sexual partners, families, and housemates at risk of infection.

Can hepatitis B be treated?

Currently there are no drugs specifically for treating hepatitis B. However, researchers are working on drugs for treating chronic hepatitis.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to avoid contact with the body fluids of infected people. A vaccine for hepatitis B, given in three separate doses, is available for people who have not yet been exposed but are at high risk because of occupation or lifestyle. The vaccine is safe for most people, with the most common complaint being soreness at the injection site. People who receive the vaccine as a precautionary measure can continue to donate blood.

People who have definitely been exposed to hepatitis B, such as newborn infants of infected women, are given a solution called hyperimmune hepatitis B globulin, or HBIG, as well as vaccine. HBIG is a concentrated solution of natural disease-fighting proteins made by the human body. This antibody solution is made from donated blood that is treated so it cannot pass on the AIDS virus. People who receive an injection of HBIG are only "borrowing" temporary protection against hepatitis B, which is why people at high risk of another exposure are also given the vaccine.

What is the difference between hepatitis B and other kinds of hepatitis?

The symptoms of different kinds of hepatitis are similar, so blood tests are necessary to make a definite diagnosis. However, the viruses that cause different kinds of hepatitis are spread in different ways. Hepatitis B and non-A, non-B hepatitis are usually spread through body fluids, while hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food, water, or stool (feces).

Where can I get more information?

Your personal doctor

Your local board of health

Listed in the telephone book under municipal government

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Immunization Program, Jamaica Plain, (617) 522-3700

Central Regional Health Office, Rutland, (617) 886-4711

Northeast Regional Health Office, Tewksbury (617) 851-7261

Southeast Regional Health Office, Lakeville (617) 947-1231

Western Regional Health Office, Amherst, (413) 549-1045

Office of Public Information and Health Education, Boston, (617) 727-0049